DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 267 905 PS 015 697

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TITLE A Pedagogical Bridge between Pre-School and Primary School.
INSTITUTION Council for Cultural Cooperation, Strasbourg (France).
PUB DATE Sep 85
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Educational Research Workshop on Child Development at Primary School (Madrid, Spain, September 24-27, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Ability; *Concept Formation; *Developmental Continuity; *Early Childhood Education; Educational Practices; Foreign Countries; *Metacognition; Preschool Education; Primary Education; Student Attitudes; Teacher Attitudes; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS *Sweden

ABSTRACT

This paper offers examples of how the preschool child's and teacher's perceptions of activities differ and indicates consequences for children when such differences are not considered. Additionally, findings of related research are reported. It is pointed out that such examples could have implications for the content of the preschool and primary school curriculum, and that the risk of problems in school is increased if the child does not understand the assumptions about learning made by adults. Although school-like activities are increasingly found in the preschool, preschool teaching needs to be structured differently from that in the traditional school. Further, such structuring can be accomplished if adults thematize and make problematic in a goal-directed way certain aspects of the child's everyday life in order to give the child a chance to think in the context of challenging activities. Teaching at preschool and primary stages of schooling should begin with and have as a goal, the child's thinking. (RH)

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DECS/Rech (85) 35
Or. Engl.

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COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL CO-OPERATION

Educational Research Workshop on Child Development
at Primary School

Madrid 24-27 September 1985

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A PEDAGOGICAL BRIDGE BETWEEN PRE-SCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL

by

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PS 015697

Introduction

A Commission was set up in 1980 by the Government in Sweden to examine the relationship between pre-school and primary school. Since children in Sweden do not begin primary school until they are seven, one of the main tasks for the Commission was to find out the consequences of lowering the primary school age from an economic, pedagogical, and organisational point of view. This summer the Commission presented their report (SOU 1985:22), which discusses three ways of handling the relationship between pre- and primary school: to let children begin school as they do today, to lower it to the age of six or to start gradually. The decision now rests with the Government. What the Commission says very specifically however, is that a pedagogical bridge has to be built between pre-school and primary-school irrespective of when the transition takes place.

I would like to focus my presentation on one aspect of co-operation between pre-school and primary school, and that is what it means to understand children´s thinking. My point of view takes a pre-school didactical perspective. Didactics is by tradition seen as learning about teaching, though here didactic does not mean to work with traditional teaching in pre-school ,but should rather be seen as the knowledge about why, what and how to teach children in pre-school.

Pre-school, in relation to primary school has the most developed didactical tradition (Doverborg & Johansson 1986, Johansson & Marton 1985). The traditional didactic in pre-school means, that one presupposes that children should learn skills of a manual, social or intellectual character and the role of the pre-school teacher was, with these goals in mind, to develop these skills in the child. Already Fröbel (e.g. Heiland 1982) built his ideas about pre-school education on a progression from the simple to the more complex skills. His wooden-bricks, which he named "gifts", is an example of this. A young child could use them as with all bricks to practice motor abilities by putting them on the top of each other. But they also constituted basic mathematic notions which the child gradually understands as she grows older, with the teacher´s goal-directed guidance.

Fröbel´s ideas aren´t the only example. There are many theories with a similar perspective on children´s learning. What is fundamental and common

to these kinds of theories is that there are basic skills which the child need to develop. All basic skills have a cumulative structure where one skill builds on another. The question I wish to put is where does this structure begin? I would like to begin on a level which is not generally regarded as the beginning of a skill.

Already Piaget (e.g.Piaget 1975) has shown us that the child's way of perceiving his world is totally different from the adult's. We all know that, but I would claim that education hasn't taken the heed of this knowledge. What I would like to show you are a few examples of how the child's and the teacher's perceptions of various activities are often totally different in pre-school, and what the consequences for the child will be if this isn't taken into consideration.

What should children then learn in pre-school?

If we look at the transition from pre-school to primary-school we can establish that adults are not aware of how much starting primary-school presupposes of the child, because we automatically take certain things for granted. Adults presuppose that one can learn and find out things, that there is some meaning to learning to read, write and count etc. These are factors which have not been paid attention to sufficiently, which I will support with examples from recent research. And it is these basic conceptions that pre-school should work with as a part of their activities.

In my work as a pre-school teacher, teacher of methodology at the Faculty of Education and as a researcher observing children, I have considered the relationship between the intentions of the pre-school teacher and what children really understand of what is going on in pre-school. I have met children in pre-school who said that they had learnt to make roadsigns or clocks when working on the theme of traffic or time. Obviously the children have learnt to make roadsigns or clocks, but these have been the means for the teacher, by which the children should reach the goal of learning about time or traffic. These and similar observations led me to the idea that there seems to be a lot in pre-school which seems incomprehensible to the child. So I decided to carry out a study of children's conceptions of learning details of which are presented below.

These results are from an interview study with 149 children between 3 and 8 years of age (Pramling 1983). In the investigation the children had to tell me what they had learnt (were going to learn, wanted to learn) in pre-school, during the class discussions, at home, in primary-school etc.

Table 1.

The child´s conception of what he is learning (%).

	Age					
	3	4	5	6	7	8
Learning to DO	31	92	100	100	100	100
KNOW		4	11	15	11	28
UNDERSTAND						8

As we can see in this table I found three qualitatively different conceptions of learning. In the category of learning TO DO the child refers to manual skills, activities or behaviours which he expresses through saying that he has learnt to ride his bike, to weave, to read etc. As we can see this conception is totally dominant from the age of four and onwards.

At the next level, learning for the child means gaining knowledge about something. A child will, for example, say that she has learnt that if one uses earrings which aren´t solid silver, one can become "allergic". What the child says shows that she connects learning with knowing something. There are however a very small number of pre-school children who make this connection although they get many opportunities, since the question of what they learn has been put in in many different contexts. No more than 1/4 of the children after the first year in primary-school indicated evidence for this conception of learning, which from the teacher´s point of view is self-evident. It is also taken for granted by adults that one can learn to UNDERSTAND, but this conception is far from that of the pre-school child, and includes very few of the primary-school children.

Learning is in other words different things for different children and is also different from the teacher´s point of view. I think this is the explanation of why children say that they are learning to make clocks when from the teacher´s perspective they ought to be learning about time. It seems to be a structural problem. If the child does not have the idea that learning has something to do with knowledge, she will instead perceive the activity as such as something she has learnt. This phenomenon becomes a problem when the child is introduced to content, which he is not capable of understand. Instead the child does the only thing which is possible to him and that is to deal with learning on a superficial level.

From this I have gathered evidence by following themes in pre-school. I followed the process from the teacher´s intentions via observations of activities which by the teacher were labelled as included in the theme, for example class-discussion, fairy-tales, visiting different places or working with crafts in order to get an understanding of what had been discussed earlier. What I can say in general about these themes is that some children only perceived the activity as such, i.e. what they had been doing, while other children perceived what the activity intended to teach them, i.e. what the teacher´s intentions had been (Pramling op.cit).

Another aspect of learning that we take for granted as adults is that one can learn to remember by repetition. This is not at all obvious to a pre-school child. I asked them in a study, how they would go about learning a phone number to a new friend, so that they could call him up in the evening. Some children had no idea at all. Among those children who could answer I could find two different perspectives. One perspective was that children had an idea about learning it by PARTICIPATING and being involved in the activity. Or they had to listen to their parents saying the phone number every time they were going to call or answer the phone. For these children learning a phone number is embedded in time, which means that they can´t do anything except wait until it happens. Children with this conception of learning, do not think they can learn a new phone number by purpose. In the other perspective, was that children understand to utilize their thinking by saying that they have to PRACTISE, by learning it by heart. In this way children do not have to wait for the time, instead the learning could be "here and now". In other words the child now has control over his own learning and can now decide to learn a phone number.

These two different perspectives represent different levels of awareness about the child´s own thinking. Children representing the first level of conception described where children do not think they are able to learn a phone number consciously, lack the basis in their understanding for doing it, namely an understanding of their ability to think and an awareness about learning by repeated practice, which both seem to be basic a background for consciously deciding to learn a phone number (Pramling in press).

I would also like to mention that there is research showing that pre-school children often think that a figure is a name of an object and does not represent a number which is self-evident to adults (Doverborg in press, Neuman, 1986). Without a conception of number it seems to be impossible for the child to add or subtract.

Something else which is taken for granted by adults is that learning to read and write is something positive which gives you an opportunity to send or receive a message or to be able to acquire knowledge. Also many children perceive learning to read and write as something positive which gives the child a personal opportunity. But many children do not see it in this way, but as a demand from the context which is connected with a large degree of anxiety (Dahlgren & Olsson, 1985). For many children learning to read is connected with beginning primary-school, as reading from the child´s point of view is learning the skill of reading and not the acquisition of knowledge from the text as adults perceive it.

We have seen here some examples of activities where the child and the teacher have different conceptions of what it means to learn, that one can learn by PRACTICE, that one can learn to read and write in order to get or give a message or for acquiring knowledge about the world and that a figure isn´t a name but represents a number. The examples could be further multiplied with regard to the content of the per-school and primary-school curriculum where adults make assumptions that the child does not understand. Certainly, many children will sooner or later make the same assumptions, but where the child doesn´t understand the adult assumptions, there is a great risk of problems in school. All teaching is based on certain principles and the more elementary these are the greater the possibility that adults take them for granted. Because of this I consider that a reasonable task for the pre-school should be discover and handle these basic conceptions.

In what way then should the teaching of these conceptions be dealt with?

The Pre-school and Primary-school Commission suggests a more structured activity in pre-school, which is basically a good thing but also contains the risk of trying to teach children in the same way as in primary-school, by expanding the themes for providing children with knowledge, as a kind of preparation for primary-school.

Another aspect of teaching in pre-school which I have studied is the form in which themes are worked with, which is a matter of course for the teacher and that is all the different activities in the theme constitute the theme as a whole. From the teacher´s point of view this means that if you want to teach children about the horse you do it also when you visit the riding-school or make horses in clay etc. But from the child´s point of view he only connect learning with the class-discussions, all other activities were just for fun or pleasure. This means that children in pre-school were already on their way to taking on a passive school-like attitude to learning (Pramling 1985).

In a brief study I also compared Swedish and Indian 4-year olds´ conceptions of learning in the pre-school context. Most Swedish children said that they did not learn anything in pre-school, but after further questions such as "isn´t there anything your teacher wanted you to learn", many children suggested "not to run in the corridor, not to fight, to wash your hands before dinner" etc. Swedish children answer by saying how they are expected to behave. On the other hand all the Indian children answer with subjects such as reading, writing and counting (Pramling 1981). I do not want to evaluate these two different perspectives, but only to establish that children´s conceptions of learning are created very early from the experiances they get.

It is beginning to be more common with school-like activities in pre-school. We have, for example, these "before-school-books", which it is popular to give to 6-year-olds, as a preparation for school. I recently visited a pre-school where children worked with their books trying to find similarities and differences among pictures. I asked a little boy why he was working with this activity. He pondered a while, and then said. "I dont know". After a few minutes he turned around to his friend and asked him if he knew why they

were working with this book, but his friend didn't know. Suddenly he turned around to to me and said "I think it's because we should be occupied with something."

Pre-school needs to be structured differeatly from traditional school teaching. In the beginning of my paper I pointed out pre-school didactic as a conscious effort towards a particular content.

Continuity is a notion which is used a lot when discussing the relationship between pre-school and primary-school. The structure of those skills I have mentioned is based on a continuity which is necessarily cumulative. Children spontaneously create conceptions about different phenomena which have to do with the world of primary-school, long before they begin there, from the experiences they acquire in pre-school and at home. Children have to be guided towards conceptions which are more in line with the intentions of the teaching.

This can be done if adults goal-directedly problematize and thematize certain aspects of the child's everyday life, in other words give the child a chance to use his thinking in challenging activities. This should be done in everyday life when dealing with concrete activities. To thematize learning could be to focus the learning aspect whilst working with themes, by letting the child think and reflect on his own learning, but also to focus on other notions which are related to learning such as, finding out, being able to, knowing, understanding etc.

Finally

What I have tried to say is that there is content which has to do with human competence and skills. Skills which help people to be a part of society. This skills development ought to guide both pre-school and primary-school. Furthermore these skills have a built-in cumulative structure which already begins in the basic assumptions about the phenomenon. One part of the pre-school activities should deal with these conceptions, via thematizing and problematizing the child's every day life. This means that teaching at both stages of school should begin with, as well as have as a goal in, the child's thinking. Through working with the built-in structure of the content of these skills we build a pedagogical bridge where we develop continuity

between pre-school and primary-school and where organisational aspects are less in focus.

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